CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1.   A method for selectively providing data between networked devices, comprising the acts of:

5   storing virtual media resources, a plurality of authorized users, and access rights to the virtual media resources for each of the plurality of authorized users in a remote directory server;

           receiving an access request for a desired resource of the virtual media resources at the remote directory server via a network; and

10   responding to the access request based on the access rights of the authorized users by the remote directory server via the network.

2.   The method of claim 1, wherein the act of storing comprises the act of forming a hierarchical structure of the access rights for the plurality of authorized users.

15

3.   The method of claim 2, wherein the act of forming the hierarchical structure comprises the act of creating an organizational tree comprising at least one relationship branch having a plurality of nodes at a plurality of levels ranked with respect to one another, wherein each node represents at least one of the virtual media resources.

20

4.   The method of claim 1, wherein the act of storing the virtual media resources comprises the act of obtaining a data image of a software resource in a data storage format of a standard data storage media.

5   5.   The method of claim 1, comprising the act of generating the virtual media resources from content of a standard removable computer disk.

6.   The method of claim 1, wherein the desired resource comprises at least one virtual media image of operating system installation files.

10   7.   The method of claim 1, wherein the desired resource comprises at least one virtual media image of application program installation files.

8.   The method of claim 1, wherein the desired resource comprises at least

15   one virtual media image of application data files for use by a desired software application.

9.   The method of claim 1, wherein the desired resource comprises data indicative of a data storage location of virtual media representing the desired resource.

20

10.   The method of claim 1, wherein the act of responding to the access request comprises the act of protecting the virtual media resources against unauthorized access by a requesting user.

5

11.   The method of claim 10, wherein the act of protecting the virtual media resources comprises the act of providing the desired resource to the requesting user only if the requesting user is authenticated as one of the plurality of authorized users and only if the authenticated requesting user has access rights to the desired resource.

10

12.   The method of claim 10, wherein the act of protecting the virtual media resources comprises the acts of:

receiving identification information of a requesting user; and

authenticating the requesting user if the identification information indicates the requesting user as one of the plurality of authorized users.

15

13.   The method of claim 12, wherein the act of protecting the virtual media resources further comprises the act of:

evaluating the access request for the desired resource against the access rights of the requesting user after user authentication.

20

14.   A method for selectively providing data between networked devices, comprising the acts of:

forming a hierarchical user access tree comprising at least one relationship branch having a plurality of nodes at a plurality of levels ranked with respect to one another;

5   associating a plurality of virtual media resources to the plurality of nodes;

storing access rights of authorized users at each of the plurality of nodes;

processing an access request for a desired resource of the plurality of virtual media resources by verifying that a requesting user is one of the plurality of authorized users and verifying that the desired resource is within the access rights of the verified

10   requesting user.

15.   The method of claim 14, wherein the act of associating the plurality of virtual media resources comprises the act of storing virtual media images representing data contents of physical media for a data storage device.

15

16.   The method of claim 15, further comprising the act of transmitting the virtual media image corresponding to the desired resource to the verified requesting user having access rights encompassing the desired resource.

20

17.   A system, comprising:

a plurality of devices disposed in a network;

a database of resources disposed on one of the plurality of devices,

wherein the resources comprise a plurality of virtual media resources, a plurality

5   of authorized users, and access rights of the authorized users to authorized

portions of the plurality of virtual media resources;

an access protection module disposed on one of the plurality of devices

and configured for restricting access of the plurality of virtual media resources to

authorized users having appropriate access rights; and

10   a request processing module disposed on one of the plurality of devices

and configured for processing a resource request by a user for a desired portion of

the plurality of virtual media resources according to the access protection module.

18.   The system of claim 17, wherein the database, the access protection

15   module, and the request processing module are disposed on a directory server.

19.   The system of claim 17, wherein the database is organized as a

hierarchical tree structure comprising at least one relationship branch having a plurality of

nodes at a plurality of levels ranked with respect to one another, wherein each node

20   represents one portion of the plurality of virtual media resources.

20. The system of claim 17, wherein the plurality of virtual media resources comprise data images of physical media for standard data storage devices.

21. The system of claim 20, wherein at least one of the data images represents physical media for loading an operating system.

5

22. The system of claim 20, wherein at least one of the data images represents physical media for loading an application program.